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SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S MIXED REACTIONS TO THE EU'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE

REF: A. 08 WARSAW 1409

¶B. STOCKHOLM 32

¶C. MOSCOW 562

¶D. MOSCOW 473

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) When the EU first tabled the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EPI) in December 2008, the GOR called for transparency on the proposal, while FM Lavrov privately likened it to NATO expansion. To some in Russia, the EU had joined the competition over the post-Soviet space, an assessment that was not contradicted by the statements of representatives from European foreign ministries at a December academic conference in Moscow. In the intervening months, the EU has worked to allay GOR concerns, with the GOR dropping demands for observer-status for the EPI Summit in Prague, although if Russia insists, EU diplomats tell us they would invite Russia to the session. Should the EU overcome the myriad of challenges and move the EPI forward, we may find it a useful tool in furthering our democracy and free market goals in the region. End summary.

Initial Reactions

¶12. (C) The GOR's view of the EU's proposed EPI has evolved since its unveiling in December. The initiative offered association agreements between the EU and Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova and possibly Belarus and, as an extension of the existing Neighborhood Policy, could provide some funding on as yet unspecified projects to strengthen governmental institutions and civil society in those countries. According to European diplomats, the GOR initially reacted negatively, with FM Lavrov in a closed December 17 lunch with EU ambassadors equating the proposal to NATO expansion. In his January 23 visit to Estonia, Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Grushko was reported to say that the EU "had gotten in over its head" on the EPI. These statements stood in stark contrast to previous messages from the MFA and Russian analysts, who had welcomed the EU's work in Eastern Europe as a means to develop those economies and stabilize the region. The initial Russian misgivings encompassed a range of known sensitivities: competition with Russia for influence in the post-Soviet space, an alternative to NATO MAP (or a consolation prize), support for social and economic changes that might promote "color revolutions," and fear that agreements with Europe might erect new barriers between Russia and partner countries.

GOR Welcomes Transparency

¶13. (C) Despite the harsh closed-door comments, Russian MFA Director for General European Cooperation Vladimir Voronkov,

in a meeting with us January 29, credited the EU for its "constant consultations" with the GOR on the EPI. He noted that there were "internal EU problems" in the make-up of the proposed partner countries and in funding, saying that only Georgia appeared in favor of participating. However, he told us that if the "EU was interested in Russian participation, we would be interested in participating," including sitting as an observer in any future summit or meeting with partner countries. He cautioned that the GOR would have to see a list of concrete proposals before making a commitment or a judgment. As a way to assuage Russian concerns, EC diplomats told us that the EU would consider giving Russia observer status in future meetings; although our EC colleagues are quick to assure us that there is no Russian "veto" on relations between these states and the EU. EC diplomats also shared with us their assessment that this proposal, under the Czech Presidency, was "just a warm-up act" for the Swedish presidency who would take this on more seriously.

#### Questioning Motives and Touching Sore Points

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¶4. (C) A large reason for the initial Russian reaction lay in suspicion of EU member-states' motives, particularly with Sweden and Poland as the main drivers behind the proposal (reftels A and B). EC diplomats shared their concern with us in January that "over-enthusiasm" by certain member-states (read: Poland, Sweden, and Baltic states) could undermine the consensus forged within the union and any hope of Russian cooperation. Russian participants at a December 18-19 MGIMO conference on EU-Russian relations reacted negatively to comments by EU participants, who were seen to challenge

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Russia's influence in the region or hinted that this program could foster social, political, or economic change in Russia. Johannes Eigner, Head of Department and Deputy General Director at the Austrian MFA, told the conference that the EPI gave an "opportunity for Russia to preview economic change and reform" that could then be implemented in Russia. Polish MFA Director for the Eastern Department, Jaroslaw Brakiewicz, pushed this further and said that EU-inspired reforms in the six proposed countries would serve as a tool to "make changes in Russia." Harri Tiido, Under Secretary at the Estonian MFA, told those present that "NATO and the EU are not moving east, the countries of the region are moving west (away from the Russian model)." Even the relatively liberal Nezavisimaya Gazeta took issue with an "EU-managed Commonwealth of Independent States."

¶5. (C) The language in the EPI itself, when read from a Russian perspective, pressed known sore points: a new framework for energy security, challenging Russia's position on this issue, and EU support for economic and social development, heard as code for "color revolutions" to some Russian ears. The proposal also touched on a debate within Russia on whether the EU was joining NATO in a fight over Russia's declared "sphere of interests" in the CIS and other former Soviet states. Alexei Arbatov of the Moscow Carnegie Center, at the same MGIMO conference, said that Russia has "privileged interests" in these countries and that in reference to the EU, NATO, and the EPI that Russia was "not ready for them (proposed partner states) to take part in an alliance that Russia was not a member of."

¶6. (C) The draft EPI proposal also threatened Russia's "privileged interests" by erecting new barriers between Russia and the six proposed partners. According to the proposal, participants who meet EU criteria, would be eligible for a "deep and comprehensive free trade area," increased ease of travel and a reduction in visa restrictions, and assistance in border management. Deputy FM Vladimir Titov told the Ambassador March 5 that the EPI should not create "contradictions" between Russia and the EU (reftel C). The GOR will closely watch developments to ensure that the EU's programs do not increase barriers for

Russian citizens traveling to countries where they have had visa free or relatively easy travel. Further, despite the large volume of trade between Russia and Europe, the EU has not offered Russia the depth of trade and travel liberalization that it is prepared to do with EPI candidate countries. If Russia fails to secure its accession to the WTO, experts note, it will not be in a position to deepen its cooperation with the EU to the degree offered the Eastern Partnership states, without a comprehensive renegotiation of the EU-Russia PCA.

Coming Full Circle?

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¶ 17. (C) In the intervening months, Russia concerns over EPI have appeared to ease, perhaps as Moscow takes the initiative less seriously. Head of the MFA's EU Unit, Petr Plikhin, told us that as long as the initiative did not complicate Russia's relations with its neighbors, the GOR would not oppose it. That said, both Plikhin and Titov discounted the ability of the EU to carry this proposal forward due to the lack of financial commitments, with Plikhin pointing to the EU's inability to make any concrete progress on similar initiatives with neighboring North African countries. Plikhin also told us that during the February 11 Russia-EU Troika meeting that FM Lavrov did not insist on Russian observer status at the proposed EU summit with EPI partners in Prague (reftel D).

Comment and Recommendation

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¶ 18. (C) The EPI holds out the promise of helping to build democratic practices and open-market principles that we have long sought in the region, at a time when immediate movement towards NATO membership is unrealistic. We agree with other Posts' assessments that EPI is a promising tool for encouraging the Euro-Atlantic's aspirations of the former CIS states. However, the trick will be to not oversell the initiative in a manner that causes Russia to conclude we are back to a zero-sum competition for influence in the region and causes them to work against the initiative. As we champion EPI, we can reiterate our goal of Russia's WTO membership, without which Russia's economic relationship with the EU would not deepen at the same pace as that of the EPI countries. A deeper European economic relationship with Russia and the EPI countries would in turn reinforce our vision of these countries, including especially Russia, as

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indispensable and integral European partners.  
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